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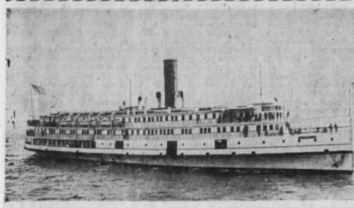
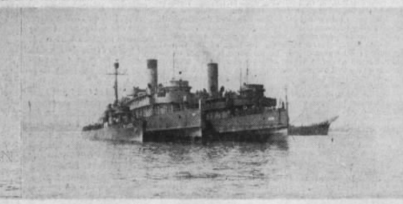
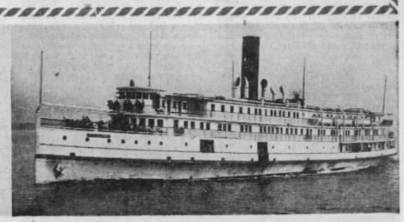
Former Favorite Bay Steamers Battled Nazi Wolf Pack In World War II



Norfolk and Washington Steamboat Company's SS Northland, built in 1911 at Wilmington, Del., for Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River service. The Northland was taken over by the War Shipping Administration in July, 1942, sailed across in convoy to England that autumn, was used by the British for a year and then taken into the U. S. Navy as USS Leyden. After the war she was sold to Chinese interests and renamed Hung Chong. She was broken up in China in 1955.



Two former Washington Line steamboats in war service. The USS Leyden (ex-Northland (IX-167) and the USS Southland (IX-168) together with U. S. Navy patrol craft PC 1233 moored in a cluster in Cherbourg Harbor, France, as shown in an official U. S. Navy photograph taken on Aug. 11, 1944. Neither of these favorite old steamboats returned to their native waters. Both were acquired by Chinese interests and made the long trip out to the Orient from England. Both served there until 1955.



Newport News-built steamboat Southland constructed in 1908 for the Norfolk and Washington Steamboat Co. With her sister-ship, the Northland, this venerable boat was taken into government service in 1942. On the way across the Atlantic her convoy was attacked by Nazi U-Boats and the Southland was credited with sinking one member of the wolf pack. After the war she went to China and was renamed the Hung Yung. Little Collection photos from The Mariners Museum.

Daily Press
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By ALEXANDER C. BROWN

Over and above the condemning and closing of the Old Point Comfort pier as of the first of this year by the U. S. Army, there is still another all-too logical reason why the bay steamers, what few of them that are left, no longer serve the Peninsula. The majority went away and didn't come back.

Early in World War II the government requisitioned the greater portions of their fleets from all the bay carriers. Of seven regular Old Point visitors so preemptorily taken, regrettably only one returned. One went to the bottom. One went to Israel. Two went to China. Two remained in the Gulf of Mexico. One, the Pennsylvania Railroad Company's former Cape Charles steamer Virginia Lee, did come back later and was rebuilt as the diesel ferry Accomac and she is now on the Little Creek run. But, sad to say, the others were never replaced.

This account will attempt to cover the war-time history of little vessels designed not for storm and shell, but merely to transport holiday-seekers and others on placid inland waters. Certainly battling Nazi wolf-packs in mid-Atlantic was not a part of their original conception. Yet they acquitted themselves well, adding an illustrious chapter to the record of American maritime enterprise.

VITAL NEED

In the early stages of World War II, with German U-boats raising havoc along the Atlantic Sea lanes, the need for almost anything that would float was vital. Accordingly, early in 1942, the government through the War Shipping Administration, having already taken ocean-going vessels from their owners, set about to requisition coastwise and sound-class steamers along the Atlantic seaboard as well. The greater part of them were to be transferred to the British Ministry of Transport for conveyance over-seas where they could be put to use for a variety of purposes —as training and barracks ships, hospital and command craft.

At this time the bay carriers whose vessels made daily calls at Old Point included the Norfolk and Washington Steamboat Company which had three vessels, the Northland, the Southland, and the District of Columbia. The Baltimore Steam Packet Company which recently merged with the Chesapeake Line, had six boats, the State of Virginia, the State of Maryland, the President Warfield, the Yorktown, the City of Norfolk, and the City of Richmond. The Pennsylvania Railroad ran two boats to Cape Charles, the Virginia Lee and the Maryland. A total of eleven boats regularly served the Peninsula.

By the time the requisitioning was over, the Washington Line had one vessel left, the District of Columbia. The Old Bay Line (as the Baltimore Steam Packet Company is less formally known) had two, the City of Norfolk and the City of Richmond. And the Maryland remained to do the best she could with the vastly mounting traffic over the Pennsylvania's Delmarva Division. The fleet was down to only four.

It seems somewhat extraordinary that those shoal-draft, inland water, essentially pleasure boats should have ever been considered in the light of warships and particularly so in the case of the Potomac River boats, both of which were then more than 30 years old. When queried on the matter, the government issued an official euphemism that the Northland and the Southland were required "for war purposes." Beyond that, no statement was ever released about them until the war's end.

FIRST TO GO

The State of Virginia was the first of the local fleet to go. She was requisitioned by the government in Baltimore on April 1, 1942, and was followed by her sister-ship, the State of Maryland the very next day. The Maryland was taken into the Newport News Shipyard and her passenger quarters and other appointments of peacetime employment were summarily ripped out and in a few days she emerged as a small cargo steamer. Similar treatment was accorded the Virginia in Baltimore and then they both were put into the hands of the Army Transportation Service and served for the duration of the war as passenger and troop carriers in the Caribbean and South American waters.

Then on July 10, 1942, five more Chesapeake Bay boats were taken by the government — The Southland and Northland, cited above, and the President Warfield, Yorktown, and Virginia Lee. These five, along with several Long Island Sound and other northern boats were intended for use abroad.

To prepare them for transoceanic war duty, they too had considerable amounts of interior fittings and passenger accommodations removed. Foredecks were covered with turtle-back sheathing, mooring chocks were plugged and open spaces boxed in with heavy planking. This effectively closed the areas between main and saloon decks aft and between saloon and gallery decks foreward. Armament was added and the boats were then painted a somber gray from stems to sterns.

Though the need for the services of such a "dishpan fleet" on the other side of the Atlantic was increasing daily, there still was, of course, the little matter of getting the boats over there. And many seasoned mariners doubted that it could be done with vessels designed for navigating protected waters alone.

HAD FAITH

One man, however, Capt. R. T. Park, superintendent of Britain's Coast Lines, Ltd., of Liverpool, was of the opinion that not only would the boats prove dependable and sufficiently fast to make the trip across, but that it would not even be difficult to find volunteer crews to man them for the voyage despite its obviously very great risks.

Accordingly, Captain Park was appointed a committee of one to implement the matter. Swiftly and effectively crews were collected in England, the masters and other officers coming from Coast Lines, Ltd., while the ratings were drawn from the Liverpool shipping pool. In all, some 550 Britishers were detailed to man the ships.

Meanwhile, preparing the steamboats went on as swiftly as possible in various East Coast American Shipyards. Naturally there were heartbreaking disappointments. One steamer burned out at Philadelphia and the Virginia Lee developed structural troubles which could not be remedied in time if the fleet were to be dispatched for Great Britain before the season of equinoctial gales set in on the North Atlantic and the good weather of summer broke. Accordingly, the Virginia Lee dropped out and subsequently was fixed up and sent south instead of north. Despite the very great need felt for her in local waters, the government sent her to South America where she operated for the duration of the war as a passenger boat on the Amazon River.

At length, however, having proceeded up the east coast independently, a fleet of some eight former steamboats assembled at St. John's, Newfoundland, and made ready to sail across the submarine - infested North Atlantic in a convoy. Half of them had come from the Chesapeake.

CONVOY 'MANIAC'

Eventually all was ready and on Sept. 21, 1942, in company with two British destroyer escorts, the fleet prepared for the grim business of war. A macabre humorist in the Admiralty had assigned the code name "maniac" to the convoy, less colorfully designated RB-1. Apparently security regulations were well enforced in Newfoundland and no photographs seem to have been taken of what probably was the oddest appearing convoy ever collected to tackle the North Atlantic. But residents of St. John's well recall the sailing of the brave little fleet. It was a clear, crisp autumn day —a pleasant change on that usually fog-bound coast —as the ships left fiord-like St. John's and took steaming positions outside the harbor. The course was set toward Iceland and the convoy commenced its perilous voyage at 15 knots.

The first two days were uneventful, but on the third morning was received the disquieting news that a German surface raider was in the vicinity. Nothing materialized, but the next afternoon in broad daylight and without warning two torpedoes slammed into the convoy commodore's ship, the Boston. She immediately heeled to starboard, but righted and started settling down on an even keel. Then she slowly up-ended and slipped under stern first. The former Washington boat Northland went to her assistance while the rest of the convoy steamed ahead.

But this was just the prelude of worse to come. The Nazi wolf packs had had their first taste of blood.

Then it seemed that everything started happening at once. The steering gear of the Northland jammed in the excitement of taking evasive courses after the Boston was torpedoed. Just as the Northland got the trouble rectified a surfaced submarine was sighted. Meanwhile the other ex-Washington boat, the Southland, observed a periscope to starboard. So effective did her gunfire prove, however, the U-boat was forced to submerge after 14 quick rounds from a 12-pounder had been dispatched in its direction. Then another periscope appeared, this time on the port hand, and again the Southland's gunners went into action firing 18 rounds. When it was all over the Admiralty credited the Southland with a "probable kill." — Not bad for a 1908-built river boat, built at Newport News incidentally.

NARROW ESCAPE

While this was going on, the Old Bay Liner President Warfield was being attacked and only narrowly escaped when a torpedo was sighted approaching abaft her port beam. Quick helm action swung the steamer on a parallel course and the lethal charge passed harmlessly by only 30 feet away. Two minutes later the Warfield sighted the outline of a submarine close on her port quarter and opened fire with her 12-pounder. The British escort ship Veteran joined her in the attack and the concensus was that still another submarine never made port again.

All through the day, the desperate running battle continued with a spirited defense being carried out by the now well scattered little fleet. But the Nazi U-boats were still not through with the convoy, brazenly signaling the ships' positions to each other. The former Long Island Sound steamer New York was torpedoed at dusk on the fourth day and exploded in a sheet of flame. While searching for survivors H.M.S. Veteran was struck and she, too, went to the bottom with heavy loss of life for she was then carrying not only her own crew but also men she had rescued from the other vessels.

The former Chesapeake Line steamer Yorktown, a 1928-product of the local shipyard, was the final casualty. On the evening of the sixth day, Sept. 26, 1942, she was hit amidships on the port side, her superstructure collapsed and she went down in the matter of only three minutes. Survivors, including Capt. W. P. Boylan, adrift on rafts, fortunately were discovered the next day by a British patrol plane which dropped supplies to them. But the men had to remain on the rafts for some 46-hours in rough seas and with a bitter wind before a destroyer found and rescued them.

REACHED PORTS

In the meantime, proceeding independently, the five surviving steamers reached various ports in the United Kingdom. Even Dr. Goebbels, Hitler's bombastic propaganda minister, was forced to pay tribute unwittingly to the spirited action of these little 300-and 400- foot vessels, which, incidentally, he magnified in his Radio Berlin broadcast by claiming the sinking of "several ships of the 'Queen Mary' class." —Not bad for the little Chesapeake Bay boats! Goebbels named as probables the Duchess of Bedford and the Reina Del Pacifico, both big converted liners, neither of which was anywhere near Convoy RB-1 at the time. However, the German announcer observed that "the defense was so fierce that it could not be observed whether two or more of the transports hit sank or not."

It was initially reported that the little ships were deliberately sent out as a decoy to lure enemy submarines away from another more vital convoy carrying thousands of American troops to Britain. This was not the case, however. At the final tally, it was three steamboats and one of their little escorts which went to the bottom with a loss of 131 men. King George VI gave well earned decorations and commendations to surviving officers and men of the fleet and there were posthumous awards for gallantry as well. And so "Convoy Maniac" came to take a well deserved place as one of the more shining episodes in the noble roster of brave deeds of the British Merchant Service in World War II.

Now reasonably safe in ports in England, the boats then went on to assume their various and more prosaic military duties for the duration of the war.

UNEVENTFUL MONTHS

The next few months of the President Warfield's career were spent uneventfully at moorings off the little English village of Instow on the Torridge River where, stuck fast in the mud at low tide, she served as a combined operations training and barracks ship for British commandoes and marines. The British subsequently decided that this phase of her operations had been successfully concluded and in July, 1943, she was returned with thanks to the United States Navy. At the same time both the Southland and the Northland were also returned. The Northland was then renamed the USS Leyden since we already had a USS Northland on the U. S. Naval roster. Both the President Warfield and the Southland kept their original names, however.

All three crossed over to Normandy in the wake of the successful invasion. At Omaha Beach, moored close in to the artificial breakwater made by sinking obsolete hulks and concrete block ships off shore, the former Old Bay Liner USS President Warfield became a happy home for many U. S. Navy personnel attached to the port director unit which operated the teeming beachhead and anchorage area. Some of her residents knew her well from peace - time trips to Baltimore and one of them even was assigned the same cabin on board which he had occupied on his honeymoon. Appropriately, they nicknamed the Warfield the USS Statler.

She later ran on the Seine carrying troops from Le Havre to Rouen. And then once the war was over she was sent back across the Atlantic to her original home waters of Hampton Roads. She arrived at the Norfolk Naval Operating Base on July 25, 1945, and was decommissioned and offered for sale by the Maritime Commission in September the same year. After a period of inactivity in the James River Reserve Fleet she was quietly acquired by Haganah, the Jewish underground organization, sailed back across the Atlantic, and renamed the Exodus 1947, attempted to run immigrants to Palestine through the British blockade. This was just prior to the establishment of the new state of Israel.

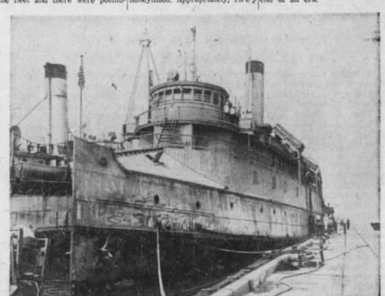
TRIP TO ORIENT

The two Washington boats remained for a long time in Plymouth Harbor, England, and were ultimately acquired by Chinese interests. They made the long trip out to the Orient via Suez becoming the Hung Chong and the Hung Yung upon arrival in 1947. They then disappeared behind the Bamboo Curtain and though reputedly scrapped in 1955, their actual fates are unknown.

The State of Maryland and the State of Virginia found no purchaser after the war and after a considerable period in idleness spent in Mobile, Ala., reserve fleet they too felt the bite of the ship-wrecker's torch. So ended the careers of the former Chesapeake Bay steamers. Failure to get them back in operation after the war was most unfortunate according to the reckoning of steamboat enthusiasts hereabouts. Meanwhile transportation needs developed other channels. That still, cold night of Dec. 30, 1959, when the City of Richmond docked for the last time at Old Point marked the end of an era.

A photograph of the President Warfield, then flagship of the Old Bay Line fleet, taken from the roof of the Chamberlin Hotel in 1939 by Alexander C. Brown. The Warfield was built in 1928 for the Baltimore Steam Packet Company's Norfolk to Baltimore service, making regular stops at Old Point Comfort. The Warfield and three other steamers of the Old Bay Line were acquired by the War Shipping Administration during 1942. She crossed to England that autumn.

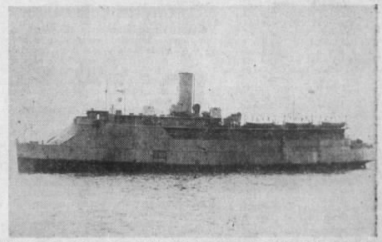
Former Old Bay Liner State of Virginia as converted for military duties in World War II as a troop and cargo carrier operated by the U. S. Army. From Army Transport Service official photograph, Sept. 1, 1942.



The USS President Warfield, having served abroad during World War II both in England and at Omaha Beach in Normandy, came back to her native haunts. Official U. S. Navy photo shows her at the Naval Operating Base, Norfolk on July 27, 1945, shortly after her arrival from overseas. Decommissioned and sold by the Navy, the Warfield was acquired by the Jewish Underground and, as the Exodus 1947, she recrossed the Atlantic and attempted to run the British blockade of Palestine in July 1947.

The brand new steamboat Yorktown as delivered by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Co. to the Chesapeake Steamship Co. in 1928 for service, originally Baltimore to West Point, Va. and then on the Chesapeake Line to Old Point and Norfolk. The Yorktown was acquired by the Old Bay Line in its merger with the Chesapeake Line in 1941. She was taken over by the War Shipping Administration in July 1942. Photo courtesy Newport News Shipyard.

The Pennsylvania Railroad Company's steamer Virginia Lee shown in a 1936 photograph by John L. Lochhead at the wharf at Old Point Comfort. The Virginia Lee was taken over by the U. S. Government in the summer of 1942 and was intended to sail across to England in September along with a number of other American inland water steamers. At the last minute, however, structural defects prevented her braving the wolf-pack infested North Atlantic and the Virginia Lee was ultimately sent down to ply the Amazon River for the duration of the war. Returned to the United States, the former Cape Charles steamer was converted to diesel power and plied for a time as the excursion steamer Holiday. Later she was acquired by the Virginia Ferry Corporation and returned to the Chesapeake where, as the Accomac, she now sails between Kiptopeake and Little Creek. Of seven former Chesapeake Bay steamers which used to call at Old Point, the ex-Virginia Lee was the only one to return to native waters following World War II.



The former Bay Line steamer Yorktown in her war paint, with her decks boxed in to prepare her for crossing the Atlantic as shown in a U. S. Coast Guard photo taken in September 1942. Late that month, the Yorktown and seven other American coastwise steamers left St. John's Newfoundland, manned by British crews. Five days out a Nazi wolf pack attacked the convoy and the Yorktown was torpedoed and sunk the next day. Two other steamers and an escort ship also went to the bottom.

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